

“‘Tis a Gift to Be Simple: The Simple Image of God”

John 14:15-21

November 2, 2008 (All Saints)

GR FUMC

Last week, my husband and I celebrated our 23rd anniversary by going out to see one of the “classic films” showing as part of a special series at Celebration North Cinema. The show we saw, “Out of Africa,” was made in 1985, the year we were married. You know that you’re no longer young when a movie you saw when it first opened is now considered a classic!

“Out Of Africa” certainly deserves the title of “classic,” though. It’s a beautifully made film. The screenplay (written by a Grand Rapids native, by the way) is based on an autobiographical book by the same title: *Out Of Africa* by Isak Dinesen, the pen name for Danish author Karen von Blixen, who wrote about her own experience owning a coffee plantation in Kenya during WWI. Like all classics, *Out Of Africa* is about many things all at once: personal stories of love and loss, and larger issues of women’s rights and colonialism and the ethics of war.

One of the advantages of having a poor memory for plotlines, as I do, is that you can watch movies more than once with exactly the same emotional effect as if it were the first time! *Out of Africa* is full of sad and bittersweet moments and as the lights went up at the end of the film last week, I was awash in a sea of tears. “I don’t remember crying this much the first time,” I sniffled to Greg. Unlike me, Greg has a rock-solid memory. “Oh no,” he said, “you cried just as much then as you are now.”

Watching the film this time I was struck by the remarkable talent of Malick Bowens, who plays Farah, the Somali Muslim who is Karen von Blixen’s invaluable

translator and right hand man. Through the years of her failed marriage and her doomed love affair, Karen and Farah develop the closest of partnerships. They trust one another, care for one another, and know each other's strengths and weaknesses as only best friends can.

At the end of the movie, weather, accident and war have destroyed the coffee plantation and Karen must return to Denmark. As they prepare to sell her estate, she and Farah say good-bye.

"How can it be now, with me and yourself?" asks Farah.

"You will have some money, enough, I think." Karen answers.

"I do not speak of money."

"Do you remember how it was, on safari?" she asks. "In the afternoons I would send you ahead to look for a camp and you would wait for me."

"You can see the fire and come to this place," he says.

"Yes. Well, it will be like that. Only this time *I* will go ahead and wait for you."

"It is far, where you are going?"

"Yes."

"You must make this fire very big, so I can find you."

In our Scripture reading, Jesus' friends and disciples are also worried about where he is going. He has told them that he will be with them for only a short time longer, and that where he is going they will not be able to come. Taking turns, they demonstrate their anxiety about his absence with their questions. To those of us who know what comes next in this plot, the questions seem naïve:

"Master," says Simon Peter, "just where are you going? Why can't I follow you?"

"Master," says Thomas, "we have no idea where you're going. How do you expect us to know the road?"

“Master,” says Philip, “show us the Father, then we’ll be content.”

One could easily expect that Jesus’ reply to his friends’ questions would take the form of a backwards look at his own ministry. Jesus knew he would soon be betrayed by one of his closest followers -- betrayed, arrested, and finally killed. Here he is at the Passover table with them for the last time. It’s not hard to picture him offering his last words to his closest friends in the form of a nostalgic visit back through the years they spent together.

Do you know the musical Camelot? Do you remember King Arthur’s last words to the Knights of the Round Table?

**Ask ev'ry person if they've heard the story,
And tell it strong and clear if they have not,
That once there was a fleeting wisp of glory
Called Camelot**

**Don't let it be forgot that once there was a spot
For one brief, shining moment
That was known as Camelot.**

As Rev. Barbara Lundblad puts it, it is so easy to “imagine Jesus calling his disciples to remember the wondrous wisp of glory they had shared, when light had come into the darkness of the world. With such a story the disciples could go on, sustained by the memory of this one great life, as they waited and hoped for his return.” They would never be able to accomplish the things he accomplished. The direction of the future would depend on their ability to remember that glorious time when Jesus was with them.

"Don't let it be forgot that once there was a spot for one brief shining moment."

But Jesus did not sing that song. Jesus didn't call the disciples to hold up his life as memory. Instead what he offers them is his presence. "I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus said, "I am coming to you." What a strange thing to say on the night of betrayal and arrest. He should have said, "I am leaving you." And, in fact, Jesus didn't deny what was going to happen. "In a little while the world will no longer see me," he said, "but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live." (Lundblad)

Lundblad says that when Jesus told his disciples, "I am coming to you," he didn't mean he would return like an old friend from a long journey. Jesus would be with believers in a different way. Or perhaps we could say that *God* would be with them in a different way *because Jesus had been there*. The eternal, cosmic Word of God became flesh in Jesus. That's what John wrote at the very beginning of this Gospel. The Spirit, which blew like a wind over the face of the deep in creation, took on flesh in the one who now sat with them at the table. This Living Word had just bent down to wash the disciples' dirty feet. Jesus was very clear." (Lundblad) "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me."

Jesus is the image of God, that's what Christians believe. Want to know what God would look like if God were human? God would be Jesus: God-in-the-flesh, God-dwelling-with-us, God-as-us. Jesus is the spittin' image of the divine.

Pastor Gary shared with me one of William Safire's *On Language* columns in which Safire traced the origin of the phrase "*spitting image*." The phrase is used as a compliment, "that boy's the spittin' image of his father. But it also carries connotations of...well, of expectorating, something you just don't do in polite company. Public spitting is not mannerly, and so the compliment always seemed a little backhanded.

Turns out, the phrase has nothing to do with expectoration. It's a shortened form of "*spirit and image*" as pronounced with a British or Scottish accent – *spi'it 'n' image*. And it means that the child not only looks like her parents, but acts like them, too. In other words, she is identical not only in image or appearance, but also in spirit, character and essence.

Jesus is the image of the Father; and the disciples are the image of Jesus. This is not something they do on their own. Living as the spirit and image of Jesus is made possible only by the power of the Holy Spirit. "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you."

At the very end of this chapter in John's Gospel, Jesus seems to be ready to leave. He says, "Rise, let us be on our way." You can almost see him getting up from the table, then realizing that he forgot to say something. "I am the vine," he says, sitting down again, "and my Father is the vine grower. Abide in me as I abide in you." But how can we abide in Jesus? He has told the disciples over and over, repeating himself at the table: You will abide in me through the gift of the Spirit.

The Spirit will teach you how to love one another. The Spirit will keep us connected, said Jesus. You to me, all of us to God. And you to one another. (Lundblad)

Years ago Rev. Lundblad says she read something rather odd: "The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home." Whoever said that was playing around a bit, for we know mountain climbers are tied together to keep from getting lost or going over a cliff. But there's another piece of truth here. When things get tough up on the mountain, when fear sets in, many a climber is tempted to say, "This is crazy! I'm going home." The life of faith can be like that-doubts set in, despair overwhelms us, we lose someone we love and the whole notion of believing in God seems crazy.

The disciples' distress and confusion about losing Jesus is a foreshadowing of confusion and distress in our own experience. Our loved ones die and their absence radically changes our lives. With each death, the knowledge of our own mortality is pressed upon us; life is short, often it seems ruled by arbitrary fate rather than a compassionate God. Jesus has not returned as so many in the early years of the church expected he would. "How can it be now?" we ask with Farah, in *Out of Africa*. How can it be now that those we love die? How can it be now that we know we will die? How can it be now when even God can seem to be absent? Does our faith make any sense?

Jesus knew his disciples would have days like that. So he told them: we're tied together like branches on the vine or like climbers tied to the rope -- tied together by the Spirit, to trust in one who is always more than we can understand, to keep us moving ahead on the journey of faith, to encourage us when believing seems

absurd. "I will not leave you orphaned," said Jesus. "I am coming to you." This promise is far deeper than fond memories of Camelot. And it wasn't only deeper for Jesus' disciples, but also for you and for me.

The Holy Spirit is the rope that ties us to Jesus, to one another and to the disciples of Jesus in all times, including the ones we honor today, the ones who have gone so far ahead that we can no longer see them. We can't see them, but we know we're connected by the same cord, we're part of the same vine, nourished by the same Spirit.

The Spirit ties us together. We feel a tug on the rope whenever we are tempted to settle for answers that make more sense, but cannot give life.

May God who breathed life into lifeless clay breathe life and hope into you now and in all the days to come.

Let us pray:

Come, Holy Spirit, tie us to Jesus and to one another. Breathe into us not only memories but the very presence of Jesus that we may love one another even as Jesus has loved us. Amen.

References

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